The Role of Toastmasters Clubs in Pakistani Universities during COVID-19 to Reduce English as the Second Language (L2) Speech Anxiety among Students

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ABSTRACT

Pakistan has 30 toastmasters clubs that are chartered with toastmasters International, USA. A toastmasters club aims to promote the communication, public speaking, and leadership skills of people to uplift their morale for attaining various beneficial outcomes. The rationale of the study is to determine how toastmasters clubs in Pakistan during COVID-19 lockdown can reduce the English as the second language (L2) speech anxiety and fears of the participants through planned online activities. The authors used the qualitative research method and designed a survey questionnaire consisting of close and open-ended questions to collect data from 23 toastmasters representing two toastmasters clubs established by highly reputed Pakistan's public and private universities. It is perceived that toastmasters clubs are using innovative and dynamic strategies to produce interactive sessions. However, speakers feel anxiety during the delivery of online speeches and presentations. They practice novel approaches and techniques to overcome their stress. Several new lessons have been acquired from participating in online meetings and contests organized during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. It has been found that clubs in Pakistan have rapidly adapted to new situations to maintain regular meetings and activities since lock down. Interestingly, it is discerned that Pakistani toastmasters clubs have made incredible progress during the lockdown and achieved Smedley Distinguished Award. The findings discuss that timely implementation of initiatives to prevail over the challenges emerging from COVID-19 has enhanced the quality of the Pakistani toastmasters clubs. The research recommends that toastmasters' university activities be used as an effective model to dispel employees' fears, apprehensions, and anxiety.

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Introduction

It is observed that the COVID-19 state of affairs has extended English as the second language (L2) anxiety among Pakistani university students (Rafi, 2020). In close collaboration, the government and universities have adopted adequate measures to facilitate the students and resolve their apprehensions, anxiety, and problems. In this critical predicament, Toastmasters International swiftly modified the mode of training and practice, switching over from lively sessions to online sessions to meet the members' needs reasonably. This research has maintained focused on two toastmasters clubs of reputed public and private sector universities in Lahore, Pakistan. The mission of Toastmasters International is to expand the communication, public speaking, and leadership skills of students and employees to nurture their perseverance, self-confidence, and personal growth (Toastmasters International, 2020). Toastmasters International is a non-profit educational organization and operates toastmasters clubs globally. It is making incredible efforts to foster the people's leadership, communication, and public speaking skills during the COVID-19 crisis. There are more than 352,000 memberships of this organization across the globe. The members improve their communicative and leadership skills by joining one of the 16,400 clubs in 141 countries that have established a global network of meeting locations (Toastmasters International, 2020).

The purpose of the study is to inform the readers that the university students experience English as the second language (L2) speech anxiety and fears while delivering their online speeches. Toastmasters clubs in Pakistan amidst COVID-19 lockdown through planned online activities can reduce the participants' diffidence and speech anxiety. Similarly, university toastmasters clubs organized their regular online meetings and activities to achieve the set objectives. The university clubs worked meticulously towards helping the students to overcome their L2 speech anxiety. It is noteworthy that students learned several new lessons during COVID-19.

Toastmasters clubs encompass well-structured meetings, self-paced programs, constructive feedback, opportunities to lead, excellent networking benefits, and escalation in career and club. Harmoniously, all these features cultivate the personality of the speaker (Blanck, 2020). It is worth mentioning that Pakistan (District 122) achieved Smedley Distinguished Award (see Figure1) despite the massive scale chaos, qualms, uncertainties, and anxiety that COVID-19 has spread across the country.
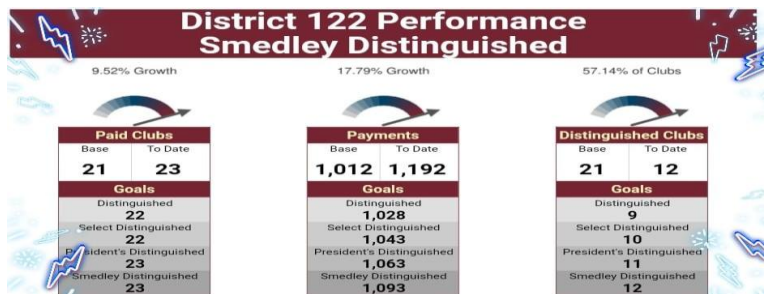

Figure 1. Pakistan Toastmasters Performance Report (accessible at: www.toastmasters.org)

The research has investigated that toastmasters clubs in Pakistani universities have rapidly switched over to online mode and started imparting training and practice to employees and

students to get through their fears and speech anxiety caused by coronavirus. They are physically apart but have become socially connected to share their unique thoughts and ideas in these critical times. The significance of the study is that toastmasters clubs in universities can be beneficial to assist students to overcome their English as the second language (L2) speech anxiety and audience fright to express their ideas and thoughts consistently, articulately, and logically without any encumbrance.

Research Questions

- What are the perceptions of toastmasters about English as the second language (L2) speech anxiety in online sessions of toastmasters clubs?
- What is the role of toastmasters clubs in Pakistani universities during COVID-19 to reduce English as the second language (L2) speech anxiety among university students?
- What new lessons toastmasters acquire from online sessions amidst the COVID-19 pandemic?

Methodology

This section describes the construction of the research instrument, sample size, data collection, analysis procedures, and ethical considerations. The researchers designed a questionnaire consisting of two parts. Part one incorporated eight structured questions, and part two included 4 opened ended or unstructured questions (See Appendix A). The questionnaire as Google Survey Form was distributed to two university toastmasters clubs, UE Toastmasters Club and Professional Toastmasters @ LUMS, established by the University of Education, Lahore and Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS), respectively. Part 1 questions were about the participants' age, gender, profession, role in the club, and mother tongue. Part 2 questions were about online versus interactive sessions, delivery of online speeches, speech anxiety, and new lessons acquired as an outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis (see Appendix A).

The sample size was n=23. There were 10 participants (6 female and 4 male) from UE Toastmasters Club and 13 participants (5 female and 8 male) from Professional Toastmasters @ LUMS. The age range of participants was; 18-23 (n=2), 24-29 (n=5), 30-35 (n=11), 40-45 (n=3) and 50 and above (n=2). 14 participants reported that Urdu as their mother tongue, 6 claimed Punjabi as their mother tongue, 2 spoke Seraiki, and 1 was a Pashto speaker. The members of UE Toastmasters Club attended 8 sessions, and Professional Toastmasters @ LUMS also organized 8 meetings during the COVID-19 lockdown. The participants have been given acronyms. UE participants are named as U1, U2 etc. and LUMS participants are named as L1, L2 and so on. Regarding data analysis, the responses of the participants were downloaded from Google Survey Form in excel sheet. The researchers used NVivo 12, which is computer software used for qualitative data analysis (QDA). The findings have been thematically organized. The responses of both universities have been described side by side.

The research has followed ethical considerations for the study. The instrument was disseminated to toastmasters after taking permission of presidents of selected universities' clubs. The participants filled in the consent forms before responding to the questionnaire.

The confidentiality of participants' identity is maintained. They have been assigned acronyms.

Results and Discussion

This section discusses language anxiety and models to overcome students' nervousness, fretfulness, worries, and stress. It encompasses findings and discussion related to research questions.

Second Language (L2) Speech Anxiety

The researchers have observed that language anxiety, especially speech apprehension, exists in L2 acquisition. The language teachers, learners, and researchers are deeply concerned about this form of anxiety because that anxiety inhibits language learning. Language anxiety emerges in both face to face and online speaking situations. Spielberger (1983: 1) perceives that speech anxiety comprises the personal feelings of apprehension, nervousness, worry, stress, and tension intricately tied to the stimulation of the autonomic nervous system. He further emphasizes that anxiety is one of the highly examined variables in psychology and education disciplines as it unconstructively and negatively influences L2 speech delivery.

Linguists, teachers, and researchers have found a complicated relationship between anxiety and effective speech delivery in L2. Horwitz (1986: 128) proposes that Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) is a situation-specific anxiety construct that releases students' adverse emotional reactions towards language learning and production. The multifaceted mental operations are essential for effective communication and performance in L2 that likely challenge a person's self-concept as a competent communicator and activate self-consciousness, reticence, fear, or even panic (Koch & Terrell, 1991).

Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) have also explored that FL (foreign language) learning is based primarily on language aptitude, therefore, anxiety about FL learning and delivery is likely to be an outcome of their FL learning problems such as anxiety, motivation, attitude on FL production tasks including delivery of extemporaneous and impromptu speeches and presentations (Sparks, Ganschow, & Javorsky, 2000: 251). Thus, many researchers have endeavored to investigate the various strategies to reduce the foreign language anxiety. Interestingly, a study indicates that a motivating classroom environment rather than specially designed instructional tasks can alleviate participants' anxiety levels. The teacher's friendly and supportive attitude encourages the learners to openly express their thoughts and ideas without diffidence and hesitation (Trickett & Moos, 1995).

The research describes two useful models to overcome anxiety in learners and participants i.e., motivation (see Figure 2) and Toastmasters International (see Figure 3).

Motivation in Second Language (L2) Acquisition

Gardner (1985:10) defines L2 motivation as 'the extent to which an individual works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity'. While studying motivation, two primary motives, such as instrumental and integrative motives, are essential. In instrumental L2 acquisition, the knowledge in a language is considered as a passport to success and prestige. The role of L2, for example, English,

becomes functional. On the other hand, motivation is called integrative if the learner wishes to identify with the target language community by assimilating culture and language (Ellis, 1991: 117).

Model of Motivation

Gardner (2007) proposed a useful motivation model for overcoming anxiety that is appropriately adapted to both the educational context and the cultural context (see Figure 2). The cultural context aspect explicitly indicates that a specific cultural community influences an individual. This cultural context is expressed in terms of one's ideals, expectations, attitudes, beliefs, personality traits etc. The educational context refers to the immediate classroom situation. The focus of the educational context is on expectations of the system, quality of the program, interest, enthusiasm and skills of the teacher, adequacy of the materials, the curriculum, the class atmosphere, etc. These can influence the learner's level of motivation (Islam, Lodhi & Khan, 2020). As shown in Figure 2, integrativeness and attitudes towards the learning situation are expected to influence the individual's motivation level. The motivation is a versatile construct (Gardener, 2007).

Figure2. Gardener's Model of Motivation (2007:14)

It is argued in the preceding sections that L2 learners undergo speech anxiety; therefore, the above-presented model of motivation can be accommodating and supportive to produce confident speakers. However, the study persuades that Toastmasters International is a beneficial model for L2 learners regarding reducing their speech anxiety.

Toastmasters International as an Effective Model to Reduce English as the Second Language (L2) Speech Anxiety

Stacey (2017) explains that much of a speaker's anxiety comes from wondering how the audience views him/her. The speaker can videotape himself/herself to allay fears that allow him/her to concentrate more on reaching the listeners' hearts and minds. When the speaker or presenter has confidence in the subject matter, the audience will benefit from what he/she has to say. Anxiety can be reduced by speaking as naturally as in one-on-one conversation. Thirdly, the speaker needs to ensure that he/she utters his/her own words and thoughts. This is how confidence as a speaker increases. However, if extreme

anxiety about public speaking becomes a problem, it is an anxiety disorder requiring treatment. Otherwise, practice leads to tremendous improvement in the speaker (Stanley, 2020). Kruger (2020) believes toastmasters clubs can lessen the speakers' stage fright and anxiety by finding a role model, gathering and organizing key points, considering words and resources, and practicing the speech.

Thus, researchers have discussed that second language (L2) speech anxiety naturally exists in L2 learners, and various motivation models have helped the students to overcome their anxiety. However, the research propagates that Toastmasters International also acts as a model for students. The role of a toastmasters club is to facilitate the speaker to become a successful communicator, improve vocabulary and grammar, apply time management skills, get training to provide specific and constructive feedback, become a keen listener, and articulate fluently to inspire others (seeFigure3). Toastmasters International has attained the status of a world leader in the development of public speaking and leadership skills (Toastmasters International, 2020).

Toastmasters Club as a Model of L2 Speech Development

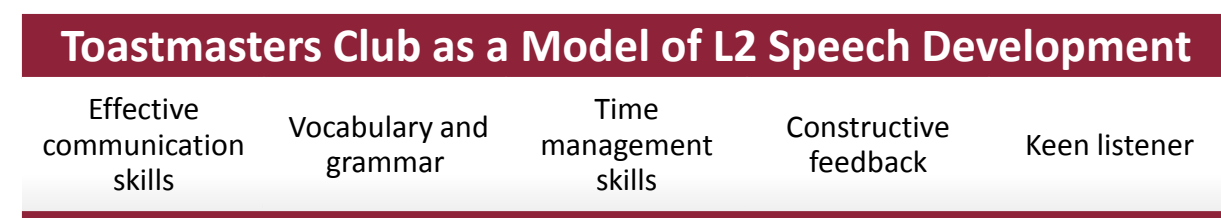| Effective communication skills	Vocabulary and grammar	Time management skills	Constructive feedback	Keen listener

Figure 3. Toastmasters International (2020)

The findings are about perceptions of online sessions versus interactive sessions, delivery of online speeches, and speech anxiety in online sessions and new lessons acquired from the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak.

Perceptions about Online and Interactive Sessions of Toastmasters Club

L1 reports, "Toastmasters virtual sessions enable us to communicate with toastmasters from all over the world and learn from them. We become skilled at using available resources and technology". U2 believes, "the speaker's active participation makes him important, engaged and interested".L3 enthusiastically asserts, "an online session is equivalently as engaging as a webinar. Interest is created through discussions, role assignments etc". U1 thinks, "a little chit chat in the pauses can develop good connection with the members". However, L4 emphasizes, "face to face interactive sessions are more impactful and assist in exploring a new environment." Finally, U5 perceives, "emotions and gestures are not produced accurately in an online meeting" (U5).

It is conjectured from perceptions that toastmasters clubs' online sessions and meetings enable the participants to communicate with other members worldwide. This online feature is inspiring and enhances students' exposure to the international community. They are making the best use of accessible resources. The audience and participants find online sessions productive, engaging, creative, and vibrant. However, a few significant shortcomings and apprehensions have been realistically expressed. In the first place, sentiments and body language cannot be as

effectively demonstrated in face-to-face interactive sessions. Secondly, online sessions contain less impact as compared to physical settings.

Views about Delivery of an Online Speech in Toastmasters Meetings

The participants of both universities express their perceptions, "in an online session it becomes difficult to maintain eye contact with camera. We also have to keep an eye on timing and internet connection" (L6). U7 writes, "looking at the screen and delivering a speech is a bit challenging at the start, but now after 7-8 meetings, I have learned how to deliver speeches smoothly". L8 believes, "it is entirely a different experience, I have learned how to communicate through video and how to use gestures properly". U8 perceives, "if you have prepared a project and know the tricks to handle the laptop camera, impact is almost like the physical meeting". L9 asserts, "lack of eye contact when cameras are off, and technological barriers can cause nuisance". U6 perceives, "one gets a bit nervous sometimes due to camera consciousness. On the other hand, nonphysical presence of other people around can muster up more courage to deliver a wonderful speech". Lastly, L10 reflects, "there is always a fear of being disconnected on account of some problem with the internet" (L10).

It is interpreted that online sessions arranged based on prevailing COVID-19 are tricky and testing because people are alarmed by technological barriers such as facing camera and sporadic internet connectivity. However, through continuous practice, they can make smooth delivery of extemporaneous and impromptu speeches. They have learned to present the complex projects with powerful impact and lucidity.

Perceptions about L2 Speech Anxiety in Online Sessions of Toastmasters Clubs

The participants perceive, "I am nervous and slightly anxious but more confident in comparison to speaking or performing in front of live audience" (L1). U2 writes, "an online session creates anxiety, but I try to participate actively in the meeting to keep the learning flame fluttering". L4 perceives, "it is important never to take online meeting easy or to get panic but to stay attentive and prepared". U3 expresses an opinion, "adequate preparation boosts confidence" (U3). L12 emphasizes, "yes, online meeting causes anxiety in my opinion due to the following reasons, camera consciousness and technological errors; therefore, practice and planning can help overcoming anxiety" (L12).

It is interpreted from participants' perceptions that although online toastmasters' activities cause nervousness, anxiety, apprehensions, stress, and tension, through practice, planning, and determination, these negative feelings impinge upon the growth of the toastmasters, can be gradually subjugated.

Opinions about Learning New Lessons from COVID-19 Pandemic Outbreak

The participants of both universities report, "it is a good way to stay connected. We have learned the usage of a new mode of interacting, and it is valuable". "It is meeting new people and adapting to technology, and you can represent your country across the globe" (L2). "I have learned techniques of handling an online meeting and delivering online speech and facing camera" (U3). "Virtual meetings are a blessing and never-ending learning. It has surpassed boundaries and has brought toastmasters worldwide together (L4). "Even the trend of virtual

participation would continue after COVID-19. Nothing can stop the passionate toastmasters from learning, meeting, and enjoying" (U6). "Online meetings are smoothly managed. The availability of participants is easier. Meeting agendas are more precise and targeted" (L7). "There are no barriers, if you want to learn. People can use online meeting tools effectively in regular official routine, this saves traveling cost and time" (U7). "A new body language is learned in terms of gestures that can convey your message while using online mode of meeting to grab the attention of the audience and make the content interesting" (L9). "Learning never stops. The important point is to stay calm, composed and focused even during times of a pandemic situation" (U8). "I have learned that online communication is crucial during this pandemic time so online toastmasters' meetings have helped me to improve my public communication skills on screen and gave me confidence to face public on-screen without any hesitation"(L11). "The special thing which I have learned from this pandemic is never given up. I am always ready to take new challenges" (U9). "The lesson is that we need to learn to adapt to this new changing face of the world" (L12). "This paradigm has removed the human-made borders and boundaries. Toastmasters are free to collaborate globally through networking" (U10). "I have acquired online learning through zoom meetings and webinars. If one way stops, another way opens" (L13).

It is surmised from the participants' views that toastmasters meetings and sessions have allowed them to meet new people worldwide. These online meetings have turned out to be blessings in disguise. Keeping themselves physically apart, they have acquired several new lessons such as using technology for conducting online meetings, time management, creativity, and social skills. It is unproblematic to join any meeting across the world without any travel cost. Online toast mastering has provided the participants with an exhilarating and scholarly experience and escalated their self-confidence, critical thinking, and personal growth.

The participants' opinion is that they can overcome mental and physical constraints to cope with the COVID-19 dilemma. Their active involvement with toastmasters clubs has enhanced their public speaking, technological and leadership skills. Excitingly, Pakistan is the only country in the world to achieve Smedley Distinguished Award (see Figure 1). More importantly, toastmasters clubs are embedded in both educational and cultural contexts portrayed in Gardener's motivation model (see figure 2).

However, COVID-19 will have long-lasting effects like the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in World War II. It is hoped that virtual participation will continue longer and toastmasters clubs in universities will substantially flourish to refine the leadership and presentation skills of students and employees alike.

Conclusion and recommendations

It is concluded that students and employees registered for toastmasters programs are utilizing available resources adequately. They are anxious but, at the same time, jubilant to have an exposure to local and global communities. They have explicitly expressed both limitations and benefits of online meetings. COVID-19 scenario throbs with excruciating pain and has the most fearful impact on the people, but fortunately, strategic means have been explored and subsequently implemented to avert attention to most productive and unique learning experiences of the year 2020. The paper has presented the toastmasters club as a useful model for students to overcome their English as the second language (L2) anxiety. It is quite encouraging to see that

toastmasters have successfully adapted to new situations and consistently take advantage of accessible technological modes and knowledge.

The study comes up with a few recommendations:

- The research recommends that education impart knowledge and train people to cope with critical times, such as the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. It is necessary to change the discourse to develop competence in learners for solving issues and challenges. The need of the hour is to adopt student-friendly learning dynamics.
- Keeping in sight COVID-19 dilemma, universities should go on with blended learning models i.e., online versus face-to-face interactive sessions. Toastmasters clubs established by universities can be used as a useful model to help students overcome their speech anxiety. It is a reasonable learning mode to produce confident speakers.
- The government and universities responded to the COVID-19 educational crisis and swiftly adapted to the online learning and teaching mode to cater to the learners' needs. However, for better accessibility of the internet in remote areas, the government can create digital centers to access the computing facilities.
- More Toastmasters clubs should be developed to foster students' speaking, leadership, team management, and project management skills.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire

PART 1

1. Your name is:

2. You are:

   (a) Male (b) Female

3. Your age is:

   (a) 18-23   (b) 24-29   (c) 30-35   (d) 36-40   (e) 41-45   (f) 46-50   (g) above 50

4. Your profession is: --------------

5. Your mother tongue is: -------------

6. Your club is: --------------

7. Your role in the club is: ---------------

8. How many online meetings have you attended since lock down resulting from COVID-19 outbreak?

PART 2

9. Is an online meeting as interesting as an interactive session? If yes, how is interest of the members created in the meeting?

10. Describe your feelings while delivering your speech at an online meeting?

11. Does an online meeting cause anxiety? If yes, what strategies do you use to overcome your anxiety?

12. Can you describe what new lessons you have acquired from participating in online meetings organized during the COVID-19 pandemic?